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A helping hand for helping hands

INLAND VALLEY
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■Mancy Mintie's Uncommon Good organization pays the school debts of attorneys and health-care workers dedicated to serving those less fortunate.

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Linda Samels Ceballos entered Loyola Law School in Los Angeles knowing she wanted to represent the poor. She graduated in 1995 owing \$58,000 in loans.

She was about to run out of means to pay back those loans when she took a job at the Inner City Law Center in Los Angeles, a firm that fights slum landlords. It was there that she met Nancy Mintie.

Mintie, a Claremont resident, made it possible for Ceballos to represent poor clients against wealthy landlords, a calling about as low-paying as lawyer jobs get, and pay off her loans at the same time. "It kind of stepped in at the right time," said Ceballos, who has loan payments averaging \$800 a month and whose starting salary was \$30,000. "Because of the program, I've been able to stay here. ... There was no way I could make that payment. I barely make it now with my regular bills."

Mintie, who turns 48 this month, started Uncommon Good in December 1999. The nonprofit operation pays the debts of attorneys and health care professionals who work with the poor. It grew out of her work at the Inner City Law Center, which she founded in 1980, and often depended on the skills of young lawyers with a social conscience. In 1998, she stepped down from her role as director. Over the next year she realized she needed incentives to keep lawyers around after they got a few years of experience. Not only were there fewer attorneys entering the field of poverty law, some were being driven out of the profession.

The reason: With attorneys one year out of graduate school facing an average debt of just less than \$90,000 and starting salaries at legal aid organizations averaging \$31,000, they couldn't afford the job.

"It really had become an economic impossibility to take these jobs and survive on them," Mintie said. "That finding became the wake-up call for me and hopefully it will be the wake-up call for others in a community that cares about access to justice for the poor."

Her career started more than 20 years ago in a garage behind a Catholic Worker soup

kitchen on skid row in Los Angeles. She lived on a \$3-a-week stipend that she spent on pantyhose and bus fare.

Her law practice grew to an organization that brought in millions of dollars of damages through its cases against L.A. slumlords, allowing poor families to set up college funds and buy homes. In all those years, she never lost a case.

When she stepped down, she had time to notice what was happening to the field of poverty law.

"I realized with a shock that the work had really disintegrated and we had lost a whole generation of public-interest lawyers," she said. "It had gone from being an economic sacrifice as it was in my day to an economic impossibility. ... The whole system has essentially collapsed."

Mintie also started to ask questions about the medical field. Almost every person who walks into a free medical clinic, she said, faces some legal problem such as an eviction or the loss of Social Security benefits. And many of her clients had medical problems from living in slum housing such as cockroaches lodged in ear canals and rat bite fever, a nonfatal malady that particularly affects children. Mintie noticed that health-care professionals were graduating with staggering debts and also couldn't afford to work with the poor.

Her work was noticed by Oprah Winfrey, who invited her on the TV show March 26, 2001. Mintie received a \$100,000 "Use Your Life Award" from Oprah's Angel Network, a nonprofit organization that awards money to those who help others. Mintie said that all of the money has gone to her recipients -- none was spent on overhead. She will be out of funds by spring.

She is trying to get religious organizations to sponsor recipients. It is a secular organization, but one that grew out of Mintie's religious convictions.

"I was raised Catholic. I think the tradition for compassion for the poor encouraged that gift in me," she said. "My faith said, 'Yes, this is right.' "

She said she hopes that religious organizations see the link between their beliefs and her work.

"For so long there has been such misunderstanding between the religious community and the work lawyers do for the poor. The work that we do is the purest form of expression of the core values of all of the major faith traditions."

Uncommon Good has a few religious sponsors, including her church, Our Lady of the Assumption in Claremont, where Mintie plays piano daily at the 6:30 a.m. Mass.

Fourteen people now receive money from Uncommon Good. Debt payments can be as

low as \$300 a month and as high as \$2,000. Some recipients grew up poor and want to give back, while others feel the need despite having a middle-class upbringing. But a commonality among some of them was a decision all faced -- should they leave their jobs for higher-paying ones? Their low salaries and high debt payments were making it impossible to live.

Recipients include Lisa Levsen, 33, a doctor who graduated from USC Medical School with \$144,000 in debt and monthly loan payments of \$1,200. She works as the head physician at the Los Angeles Mission, a free clinic on skid row.

And William Martinez, 28, who cut his medical school studies short because he couldn't afford the \$39,000 in loans after two years of graduate school and four years of college. Martinez works two jobs as a physician's assistant and supports his elderly parents and 8-year-old son.

Uncommon Good has a 22-member board of doctors, lawyers and representatives of Christian groups and is recruiting mentors. One goal is to get the state Legislature to pass a law to provide loan forgiveness to medical professionals and lawyers who work with the poor. Mintie said she hopes her organization can be a national model for other professions.

She is trying to bring legal aid services to the Inland Valley -- the closest legal aid office is in El Monte and represents 700,000 poor people throughout the San Fernando, San Gabriel and Inland valleys.

"Unless the legal aid is in the community, you can't say you are serving the poor," Mintie said.

Neal Dudovitz is the executive director of Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County, the legal aid office in El Monte. He sees attorneys new to poverty law leave all the time because they can't afford the salary with their law school debt.

"She's really opened a lot of eyes in terms of having people understand how the educational debt is limiting and reducing the services that are available to low-income communities," Dudovitz said. "Nancy is light years ahead of the curve on this stuff. Very little is being done practically to solve it."

Mintie, her colleagues say, could have made a lot of money in private practice.

"She's very kind and pleasant," said Julius Thompson, 45, an attorney at Inner City Law Center and an Uncommon Good recipient. "But she's also a woman on a mission. When she sets her sights on something, she's a formidable force."